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The individualist; a defence and a protest

New York

1917

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THE INDIVIDUALIST

A Defence and a Protest

BY

GEORGE R. BISHOP

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The solemn peaks but to the stars are known—
But to the stars, and the cold lunar beams:
Alone the sun arises, and alone
Spring the great streams.
—*Matthew Arnold.*

THE AUTHOR
13, WALL STREET, NEW YORK CITY
SEPTEMBER, 1917

THE INDIVIDUALIST:

A Defence and a Protest

BY GEORGE R. BISHOP

At the dedication, recently, of the new Unitarian church in Flushing, Long Island, the sermon was preached by one of our best-known ministers—a very popular one. That sermon I heard. I confess to having become interested when he came to Part III, in the development of which he announced that the New Religion will be strictly ethical and not theological; that, as phrased in "Religion of To-day," his new volume in which it appears as the first chapter, "The religion of to-morrow is going to be a religion of social as contrasted with individual morality."

A casuist might pause on the threshold and give a moment's attention to this obvious identification of religion and morality, and inquire whether there is or is to be anything in religion outside of morality; but this would be a discussion aside from the main question: whether there be, as implied, that fundamental inferiority of individualism to collectivism which is suggested in the sentence quoted. With the preacher himself it long has been recognized that in his view such an inferiority exists; that the two principles are irreconcilable, and that one who is an individualist will find it impossible to work in harmony with the collectivist, for the uplifting of the race or for any beneficent purpose whatever. A quotation will reveal the seriousness of his conviction of this irreconcilability and inferiority. The book says:—

"In the old days all stress was laid on the individual as such. The principles of individual initiative, individual activity, individual responsibility and individual salvation

were worked, figuratively speaking, 'to death.' 'Each man for himself and the devil take the hindmost'—this was the great axiom of life, in education, in politics, in economics, and, by no means the least, in religion."

Obviously the language quoted was based on an assumption of very complete and very accurate knowledge; and its strong emphasis might well arouse a suspicion that the assumption was not justified. Still, one who finally concluded that it was so erroneous that criticism of it was demanded, had reason to feel gratified that the issue had been so definitely defined.

Our critic cannot say, in the language of Byron, "My theme hath died into an echo"; it still resounds, for all this recalls earlier announcements by him. These are repetitions, substantially, of declarations made years ago in *The Unitarian Advance*, in chapters entitled "The Modern Church and Social Justice,"—chapters that expressed such a multitude of extraordinary and, it seemed to me, untenable propositions, that I sought, through the columns of the same publication, to correct some of the misstated facts and *non sequitur* conclusions. In the first place, it seemed to me that an initial error was committed in the attempt to state the individualistic attitude,—the holding of which was construed as amounting almost to the sin of sins,—as resulting in placing an embargo on all effort to help humanity or lift the race to a higher level. Believing that "concreting the abstract," as Prof. Bain expressed it, was a simple and effective mode of presenting an argument, I cited the case of Jeremy Bentham, who concededly was a protagonist of individualism and the utilitarian philosophy. Incidentally, the origin of his reform ideas brought into prominence the name of a pioneer of Unitarianism in America, Dr. Joseph Priestley, a scientist of eminence whose laboratory in England a mob had destroyed; who, persecuted by a bigoted multitude and driven from his home, took refuge in Pennsylvania, where he preached the faith we now hold. The history of this event should render more interesting the points of the controversy which our assailant precipitates anew upon us.

Bentham says that when he was about twenty (he was an Oxford man) he found in a pamphlet by Dr. Priestley the words that inspired him to undertake his career: "The greatest good of the greatest number"; that "it was by that pamphlet and by this phrase in it that my principles on the subject of morality, public and private, were determined. It was from that pamphlet and that page in it that I drew the phrase, the words and import of which have been so widely diffused over the civilized world. At the sight of it I cried out as it were in an inward ecstasy, like Archimedes on the discovery of the fundamental principle of hydrostatics, *Eureka*." Bentham, far from admitting that his moral vision had been narrowed or his sympathies atrophied by his individualistic tenets, declared, in as broad terms as our critic himself could have used: "I would have the dearest friend I have to know that his interests, if they come in competition with those of the public, are as nothing to me. Thus will I serve my friends—thus would I be served by them."

Without accumulating instances, I mention one other. In All Souls Church, New York, with which I am associated, —a church that is anything but socialistic,—within my memory one of the young ladies of the church established the first Working Girls' Vacation Society that was established in New York City. The idea was popular,—not as socialistic, but humane; and though she long has been married and has four sons, each of whom, in this crisis, is in the service and wears the uniform of the United States, she still is president of that Society, though its bounds have extended far beyond the limits of our church, and embrace a large number of supporters from other denominations. The point is, that while our critic preaches and writes about the need of providing homes for those threatened with tuberculosis or already incipiently afflicted with it, this Vacation Society, making no flourish about it or any sensational announcement, runs its several summer homes, in the Adirondacks and elsewhere, to which scores of those girls are sent, for longer or shorter periods as their needs require. This is a

practical way of getting results, with no announcement that our individualistic principles have been discarded, or that we are proceeding along socialistic lines.

The sermon at Flushing emphasized, I think more strongly than does the discourse as printed, the indispensability and all-sufficiency of the environment, implying that if that be secured, and the group or multitude dealt with, the individual may be ignored. I wondered, listening, whether the preacher supposed that Lincoln owed his greatness to the fact that he was born in a log cabin, among rough woodsmen in Kentucky, and as a young fellow worked—and, as he told Seward, earned his first dollar—as a flatboatman on the Sangamon and down the Mississippi! The American public has supposed that his inborn qualities—his curiosity to know, his determination to acquire an education at all hazards, his studying nights by the firelight when candles were lacking, his writing and figuring on pieces of wood because paper was not obtainable—had most to do with it; that in studying law under adverse conditions, with the qualities that were born in him as an individual,—his honesty, his judicial impartiality and fairness,—all counted more than his surroundings; and it is doubtful if any single socialist or radical reformer of the established order can convince the public that it is in error in attributing so much to the innate individual qualities of Lincoln. Lincoln was himself confronted with a permanent, ineradicable, fundamental individualistic principle,—a principle established here long before Bentham wrote a line,—which was as well expressed perhaps as it will be by any one, by the late Associate United States Supreme Court Justice, Samuel F. Miller, for years president of our National Unitarian Conference:—

"It was necessary to give the new one [the Government that succeeded that under the Articles of Confederation] the power of operating directly upon the people, without going through the instrumentality of the States." In *The Federalist*, No. 39, in 1788, still earlier, Madison grasped this essential, indispensable principle, so strongly in contrast with what preceded,

for he says: "The difference between a federal and national government, as relates to the operation of the government, is supposed to consist in this: that in the former the powers operate on the political bodies composing the confederacy in their political capacities, in the latter on the *individual citizens* composing the nation in their individual capacity."

Sir Henry Maine, commenting on the Supreme Court decision in *Dartmouth College* v. *Woodward*, which upheld the sacredness of contracts under the Constitutional prohibition against impairment or violation, said: "It is this prohibition which has in reality secured full play to the economical forces by which the achievement of cultivating the soil of the North American Continent has been performed; it is the bulwark of American individualism against democratic impatience and socialistic fantasy." A further wise comment of his was this: "The true republic must always be understood as a commonwealth saved from disorder by representative institutions" (Essay on Constitution of the United States).

Lincoln very early must have recognized that it was indispensable, in the interest of order and for the safeguarding of human rights, that this relation of the government to the individual be maintained; that it be maintained, both for demanding service and contributions by taxation and for affording protection to the citizen at home and abroad. Individual rights must be safeguarded. The Declaration asserted that all men—which meant each and every man—were endowed with certain inalienable rights; and the Amendment to Article V of the Constitution says, "Nor shall any person . . . be deprived of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law." So strictly is this safeguarding of individual rights construed and enforced, that if a man's rights be violated or encroached upon, say by a sheriff exceeding his authority, the victim has a right of personal action against the offending official, for just damages or rectification.

In our legal history extreme care has been taken to protect the individual or the minority against any aggres-

sion by the majority. This has been fundamental with us. In 1788, in the Virginia Convention, called to consider ratification of the new Constitution, Governor Randolph of that State cited the case of one Phillips who, without the formality of a trial, without being confronted with witnesses or even accusers, or being personally present, on mere rumor or report, had been attainted, by the Legislature, and executed! Contemplation of this instance and of the possibilities constituted with him a strong reason for adopting the proposed Constitution, which "secures the liberty of the citizen, his person and property." Everything had been "drawn into the legislative vortex." He respected the integrity of the Legislatures, he believed them to be virtuous; "but so long as the defects of the Constitution exist, so long will laws be imperfect." He, Madison and John Marshall (later Chief Justice), with other strong men, fought the good fight for the Constitution in that Convention, and won the State's ratification. Fortunately, a very full record—what purports to be verbatim—of the proceedings of that Virginia Convention has been preserved.

The manner in which history has been misstated or ignored by critics may well astonish us. We are charged with being utterly selfish—as if we as a nation had been blinded by our individualistic sentiments and methods, and irretrievably narrowed. Yet every man should know that in our free school system for the educating of each individual child we have set an example to the world; that in safeguarding the right of the individual citizen to protect himself we accorded the secret ballot decades before England granted it; and that the great West, with its millions of population and almost limitless acres under cultivation, with hundreds of thousands of happy, prosperous homes, stands as a constant witness to our wise unselfishness.

A personal friend, Mr. DuBois, formerly our Minister to Bogota, collaborating with another author, has had issued lately a Life of the late Galusha A. Grow, Congressman from Pennsylvania, whose greatest distinction was not that he had been speaker of the National House

of Representatives, but had been the introducer and advocate of the National Homestead Law, which gave to individuals, to each man who would go and occupy it, a tract of a hundred and sixty acres of land, set off from the Government domain. Those inducements were such that our territories and the whole Middle West rapidly became populous, so that now we help to supply the world with the grains which overcrowded regions of England and Continental Europe find indispensable. Those farms were not given to corporations or associations or companies, but to individuals who would go and settle on them; and now Canada follows our example.

Necessarily, our school system appeals to the individual child; no training of a group suffices. As rationally might the owner of a great manufactory think of dispensing with the individual expert skill of each workman; each man or woman who attends a machine must give it expert attention. Those workmen may combine into unions or associations, but that would be incidental only: the fundamental condition, the *sine qua non* of successful operation, would be the expert ability of each workman. That could not be dispensed with.

Nationally, we have given an example, during the last two decades, of the de-socializing, one might say, of a peculiar situation,—a transformation that has won the praise of the philanthropic. This has been our treatment of the Philipinos, through having purchased from the five orders of friars more than 400,000 acres they held, and given the tenants and other natives the opportunity to purchase individually, and cultivate as their own, and at nominal or reasonable prices, those holdings. Some lands, it was charged, were not fairly or honorably acquired; but we waived that question, and negotiated as rapidly as possible for the transmutation. Mr. Taft when Governor, on one journey back to the Islands, called at Rome, began a negotiation there, and arranged to continue it in Manila. It all resulted in the purchase of 410,000 acres, at a cost, in gold, of $7,239,000. It had become necessary to dissociate state and church there. Under Spanish rule they had been associated—

church and state joined—as parts of one system. What was done accorded with our American principles and with President McKinley's announcement that the welfare of the Islanders must be the paramount consideration in executing our trust there. Happily, the taking over of the lands of the three orders, the Dominicans, the Augustinians, and the Recoletos, has promoted peaceful relations, and conduced to the prosperity of the Islanders. Obviously, this taking over of title by the Government was simply part of the mechanism for giving title to the individuals who should purchase. I mention this because a half-way Socialist, a minister, lately has said to me that the present trend of opinion of Socialists is toward turning all public utilities over to the Government,—street railroads, gas, electric supply, etc. On that subject let a word be said, assuming that the advocacy of an agrarian division of assets has ceased to be the main slogan.

Publicists have recognized the danger of so extending the civil list, the list of public employees, as to give that class or any other, as voters, control of all matters on which a vote controls; the peril of placing in the hands of any class the balance of power, as clearly this might do. Beyond this, the question of utility and benefit to the public obtrudes. Mr. Ackworth, Canadian, expert in railway matters, discussing Canadian railroads and their administration,—and the Dominion has a few lines that are Government owned and operated,—has stated that those thus operated show losses where those owned and operated by private corporations show better results; and A. Lawrence Lowell, in his "Government of England," discussing tramway conditions in Glasgow, where municipal ownership and operation prevail, and discussing also tramway conditions in Germany, where they are similarly owned, concludes that as compared with Boston the advantage is with the latter, both as to economy and profit of operation and the greater comfort of patrons. As to Glasgow, which those favoring Government operation cite as an example of its superiority, and where cost of travel is varied according to

distance ridden, the average low cost really is in favor of Boston.

Still, our collectivist friends insist that the individualist idea so inthralls the soul with an inextinguishable greed, so concentrates it on benefit to itself alone, that no broad philanthropy is possible under its influence.

Ours, they say, is an individualistic era in America. That is admitted. Socialists rebuke us because this is so. Yet the proofs that must lead to their confusion and refutation bristle on every hand. Cuba, freed from Spanish tyranny by our efforts, while we have refused to profit by her redemption, lies at our southern gateway to the Gulf; and Chinese students throng our institutions of learning as the result of our having declined to accept the whole amount of the Boxer War indemnity. Another fact is so notorious that our friends should take judicial notice of it,—our benefactions to philanthropic objects so far exceed those of England that the English admit and proclaim it.

Of the beneficence of the individualistic attitude as compared with the socialistic we have a very early example in the history of the Plymouth Colony. Palfrey's "New England" records it, in Volume 1, page 214,—repeating it from Bradford. The record is, that 1623 was the first year with them in which a stimulus of individual interest "quickened the activity of toil." To each family, in place of the partnership labor previously maintained, had been assigned in the spring the cultivation and profit of a separate parcel of land, the single persons being each attached to some family, and the provision added that each cultivator "bring in a competent portion for the maintenance of public officers, fishermen, etc." He says, "The plan had very good success, for it made all hands very industrious, so as much more corn was planted than otherwise would have been and it gave far better content"; and well it might, for it recognized and gratified one ineradicable human instinct, the desire to possess, individually, demonstrated by the displacing of communistic ownership by individual everywhere.

We understand that in most countries now civilized (scholarly research shows this) communistic ownership preceded individual; the communistic belonged to an archaic, very early age,—a rehabilitation of which some Socialists say they desire. Dr. Cliffe-Leslie, distinguished economist and a barrister at law of the Middle Temple, in his Introduction to de Laveleye's "Primitive Property," doubtless spoke truly when he said: "Early forms of property were natural only in the sense of being the natural products of a very early state of the human mind. The forms natural in the present state of society are those in conformity with the development of the human reason and with modern civilization." He saw "no more injustice in unequal riches than in unequal strength or intellectual power." He perceived that the inevitable human tendency was toward inequality; that no plan could be devised ever to frustrate or avert it.

As to practical utility, our critic has had before him an example. Two ladies, one in the Church of the Messiah, the other in All Souls Church, have adorned Hackley Heights with a great and beautiful institution of secondary education—a thing that never could have been done had their respective fortunes been scattered among some hundreds of individuals. Agrarianism would have been fatal.

M. Émile de Laveleye, who has been cited, realized, he says, that Mr. Cliffe-Leslie, whom he asked to write an Introduction to the English edition of his work, entertained views with reference to some practical aspects of the subject "not in harmony" with his own; but he felt sure "his attainments, as Professor of both Jurisprudence and Political Economy, and his extensive knowledge of legal and economic history, would enable him to introduce the historical development of property instructively to the reader." At point after point, as he develops his history, the comprehensiveness and apparently conscientious accuracy of which constantly appeals to the reader, his divergence from Prof. Cliffe-Leslie becomes obvious. Toward the end of the volume this becomes especially conspicuous. His reasoning is not always

consistent; but at the end he makes it clear that personally and theoretically he believes the state should possess almost everything. Curiously, with all his concern for the welfare of the proletariat, the common workman, the agricultural laborer, he would let all wealth and all accumulation centre in the possession of the state. He quotes Schiller, one might say *contra*, "Man must have something that he may call his own, or he will burn and slay"; still, while this holds good as against those who have accumulated much, under any régime whatever, he agrees with a distinguished British economist who says that the present-day proprietors *unjustly* enjoy that increase in the value of their lands and rents, which results from the general progress of society. He thinks the citizen, proprietor or any other, should be excluded from all benefit except merely jointly as a citizen. He cites the case of the Maoris, South Sea Islanders, east coast of New Zealand, who had formed a league whose object was the total suppression of sales of land and the substitution of leases: the son of a chief, taught in England, including in law at the Temple, headed this league. This, in the mind of the author, was a fact of great promise; for if the Maoris were to lease their lands instead of selling them, "they might hope to one day become the proprietors of a fertile and well-cultivated territory, with towns, farms, and mines, and thus eventually have an income to rival those of the Dukes of Westminster and Devonshire"; and he significantly asks, "Would it not be better if all this increase of wealth some day accrued to the state?" He seems to have lost sight of one incurable infirmity in all this,—that with the state the sole enjoyer of the advantage of increase, owning everything tangible and the individual left out of the account, all inducement and inspiration to the citizen, the laborer, to exert himself, would be obliterated. And he elsewhere repeatedly shows this. He quotes Cousin: "Property is the necessary consequence and condition of liberty. Liberty is sacred: property should be not less so." Again, he cites Renouard: "Property is the condition of personal dignity";

and Locke: "Every man ought to have as much property as is necessary for his support. . . . God gave the soil to mankind at large, but, as no one enjoys either the soil or that which it produces *unless he be owner*, individuals must be allowed to use it, to the exclusion of all others." The multitude of citations, the opulence of the material, may have confused the author somewhat, but this would in no degree detract from the high merit of his remarkable volume as history. Its wealth of facts is almost dazzling; and I am confident his facts are stated with studied accuracy. He reveals the complexity of the subject, and suggests the hazard of proclaiming wholesale, unqualified generalizations, such as the one I have quoted from our critic.

Now, I believe scarcely a single rational, well-poised individualist would contend that nothing ever should be socialized and nothing ever de-socialized. (I have given an instance of the latter.) He would let the condition—a state of war, if such existed, and great efficiency and concentration of effort were demanded—determine the course to be followed, at least temporarily.

In the remarkable final chapter of his "Political Economy," entitled "Limit of the Province of Government," John Stuart Mill says:—

"Anything which it is desirable should be done for the general interest of mankind or of future generations, or for the present interest of those members of the community who require external aid, but which is not of a nature to remunerate individuals or associations for undertaking it, is in itself a suitable thing to be undertaken by government." Doubtless individualists generally would assent to that, especially in great emergencies, such as the pendency of a great international conflict like the present, when efficiency, the instantaneous execution of some comprehensive plan, is necessary. We recognize that during military occupation of a territory, courts martial may need to take the place of the ordinary civil courts, but only till the occupation shall cease, when the civil courts should resume their jurisdiction. Conceding all that the above quotation

from Mr. Mill conveys, it must not be forgotten that his views generally were unaltered. He said, "In all the more advanced communities, the great majority of things are worse done by the intervention of government than the individuals most interested in the matter would do them or cause them to be done." And he asserts a fundamental fact when he says, "A people among whom there is no habit of spontaneous action for a collective interest—who look habitually to their government to command or prompt them in all matters of joint concern—who expect to have everything done for them except what can be made an affair of mere habit and routine—have their faculties only half developed."

A further citation may be added here,—from Sir Henry Maine. Sir Henry was so distinguished as a scholar, master of style, and thinker that his sayings have become classical. He was a Pembroke College, Cambridge, man; fellow of Trinity and Pembroke; Corpus Professor of Jurisprudence at Oxford, which university made him a D.C.L.; for six years was law member of the Viceroy's Council at Calcutta; appointed by Act of Parliament life member of the Council, in London, of the Secretary of State for India; author of works almost as well known in America as in Europe, such as "Ancient Law," "Village Communities in the East and West," "Early History of Institutions," "Lectures on International Law," etc., etc. In the "Early History" (these lectures delivered at Oxford) he said:—

"I believe I state the inference suggested by all known legal history when I say that there can be no material advance in civilization unless landed property is held by groups at least as small as families; and I again remind you that we are indebted to the peculiarly absolute English form of ownership for such an achievement as the cultivation of the soil of North America."

After his death Sir Frederick Pollock said of him: "At one master-stroke he forged a new and lasting bond between history and anthropology. Jurisprudence itself has become a study of the living growth of human society through all its stages." And it may not be irrelevant to

add that not long ago Associate United States Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes made a point of showing that in its own history that Court, in its decisions, had shown a gradual drift, all within its undoubted legally justifiable sphere, in the direction of recognizing and giving effect to all the really genuine and substantial legal modifications demanded by the evolution of ideas. and methods for achieving social justice.

A contrast suggests itself between a Socialistic announcement and what Francis Parkman, who was not only a great historian but a political philosopher, declared. Mr. Farnham, his biographer, says of him, "His bugbear was the leveling-down tendencies of modern democratic institutions; his hopes of civilization were unshakeable, standing on the worth of the individual citizen"; and again, "His hope rested on good birth, the best culture, the subordination of materialism, and the leadership of worthy statesmen."

Our critic, it is said, announced that he voted the Socialist ticket; it may therefore be assumed that he adopts their platform, in whole or in substance, including this, from a recent Socialistic Proclamation:—

"The socialization and democratic management of the great industries concerned with the production, transportation, storage, and marketing of food and other necessaries of life!" This would mean placing in the hands of the untrained and incompetent masses those functions that demand the highest training in order to impart the greatest efficiency to high native ability. This is inspired by a personal interest under present conditions, or by hope of high salaries if the workmen be not participants in the profits. To contend for a return to the archaic system of 2,500 years ago, and the inevitable attendant confusion and anarchy, when applied to great modern works, seems, in its obliviousness of the demands of modern days, the extreme of folly, and the manifestation of a fantastic idealism.

Whatever the demand of the Socialist, it is not conceivable that the majority will consent to a restoration to power of the era of what M. Faguet felicitously terms the

"cult of incompetence." It was this eminent French publicist who pictured one condition of ancient Athens at the period of the pure democracy. Its most conspicuous achievement was the banishing of its most distinguished citizens. More than fifty years ago Rufus Choate stated the condition in different phrase; namely, that in that era a man might rise in the morning, rich, honored, renowned, and at night, on the whim of the multitude, suddenly summoned from the streets for a vote, be flying for his life, seeking refuge in some Oriental satrapy, or resorting to suicide as the more honorable way of ending his existence.

M. de Laveleye found among the Southern Slavs in Bulgaria, where family communities still existed, appearances favoring the conclusion that there was nothing antagonistic to prosperity in that mode; but those indicia of institutions suited to a primitive age could not withstand the conditions of a state of society in which men are striving to improve their own lot as well as the social and political organization under they which live. In short, the Socialistic régime may be suited to a stagnant unprogressive state, but not at all to one in which the spirit of enlightened progress is regnant.

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